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How Mother Teresa Was Called to Serve the Poorest of the Poor

St. Teresa of Calcutta (commonly known as Mother Teresa) served the poorest of the poor. From a very early age, I knew about the work of Mother Teresa. I had seen documentaries and read biographies — but I never knew the story behind her call to serve and how she articulated why she did what she did.

Have you ever wondered how God called her to this mission?

By reading about her life, you can ask God to help you understand more about your mission and to live it out with an even stronger passion. Check it out!

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Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born the youngest of three children on August 27, 1910, in Skopje, Macedonia (formerly Yugoslavia). When Gonxha was young, she was fascinated by stories of missionaries. In fact, she could locate different missions on a map and would tell others about what was going on in each location. During her teenage years, she was so moved by stories of the work done in India by the Yugoslav Jesuit missionaries who were serving in Bengal that she knew she wanted to be a religious sister.

At the age of 18, she not only signed up for a religious life, but she became a missionary as well. Gonxha joined the Sisters of Loretto and moved to Ireland for formation. She would never see her family again. Inspired by St. Thérèse of Lisieux (the patroness of missions), Gonxha took the name, Sister Mary Teresa. The world would know her by this name, although with a slight variation. As she gained experience and became a superior, she would be known as Mother Teresa, and eventually St. Teresa of Calcutta.

A Call within a Call

Following her formation, Mother Teresa moved to India to the city of Calcutta and became a teacher at the Loreto convent school there. For 20 years, she taught at this school and eventually became the headmistress. Mother Teresa served as a teacher during the week and helped the poor on Sundays.

If she would have continued this, her life would have been beyond extraordinary. And yet, the course of her life would take a dramatic turn in September of 1946 during a train ride for her annual retreat. To understand what happened on this train is the key to understanding what would become Mother Teresa's life work and the motivation for everything she did.

On her train ride, Mother Teresa received what she called "a second calling" or "a call within a call." It was a call to leave her life as a teacher and to serve the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. Not only would she serve the poorest of the poor, but she would call other sisters to do the same. Mother Teresa formed the Missionaries of Charity, whose goal would be "to satiate the thirst of Jesus Christ on the Cross for Love and Souls" by "laboring at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor."

I Thirst

The focus on the Jesus' thirst stemmed back to Mother Teresa's meditation on Jesus' words "I thirst" while He was on the cross at Calvary. While Jesus had a physical thirst, Mother Teresa perceived that Jesus' thirst was spiritual as well. He thirsted for love and longed for souls to come to know Him.

In her own words: "Why does Jesus say 'I thirst'? What does it mean? Something so hard to explain in words... 'I thirst' is something much deeper than just Jesus saying 'I love you.' Until you know deep inside that Jesus thirsts for you — you can't begin to know who He wants to be for you. Or who He wants you to be for Him."

After consulting with her spiritual director, she sent a letter to her archbishop: "During the year very often I have been longing to be all for Jesus and to make other souls — especially Indian, come and love Him fervently — to identify myself with Indian girls completely, and so love Him as He has never been loved before." ("Come Be My Light" 47).

Mother Teresa has become one of the greatest icons of the 20th century. She would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and became a household inspiration the world over.

Should Bill Gates Be Appreciated More Than Mother Teresa?

Still, Mother Teresa is not without her critics. In his book "Charity," Gary Anderson notes a New York Times Magazine article by Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard, who wonders: Why do so many people admire Mother Teresa? Pinker explains that Bill and Melinda Gates have used their resources to provide far more aid and eliminated far more diseases than Mother Teresa. He wonders aloud, why don't they receive more admiration than this so-called saint?

Anderson provides an argument against Pinker's esteem for the Gates. He points out that people do not admire or value Mother Teresa for her productivity or efficiency, but for her faith. While Bill and Melinda may bring better health to more people than Mother Teresa and her sisters ever could, they don't really risk anything; their lives remain pretty much the way they were. The same can't be said for Mother Teresa: She risked everything and gave her whole life to the poor. Her work came from a deeply held faith about the way God sees the world and how He wants it to be. She believed that God (whom she couldn't see) thirsted for these souls, and she gave everything to answer His call. This is true faith, one that makes almost anyone envious, no matter your religious or non-religious background.

Your Mission

When it comes to living out the mission Jesus has called us to, we have to face difficult questions. Are we willing to go beyond just *saying* that we love others and wish they would come to know Him and *do* something about it? Are we willing to do more than what makes us comfortable and instead live true to a faith that costs us a great deal?

St. Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us!

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